

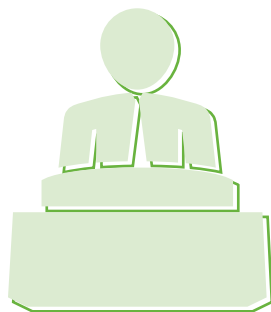
FRESH ROOTS

One Teacher's Radical Revisions

Written by MARK E. HAYES, English Department Chair

MY FATHER WAS A CAREER EDUCATOR. HE began teaching in 1966 – Civics and U.S. History – and, over the years, moved also into coaching and administration, right up until his retirement in 1996, whereupon he spent another six years teaching education classes at the University of Maine at Farmington. Early in my own career as an educator, he always offered good advice, and, graciously, only when I asked. His greatest claim to fame as a teacher was the creation, with a colleague, of a semester-long civics simulation called “Sunshine USA” that was even featured on CBS News’ *Sunday Morning*.

At a particularly difficult but important point in my teaching career, my father gave me some excellent advice, advice that helped me then and that has helped me continue to avoid the burnout, boredom, and routine that can drive many teachers out of education altogether.

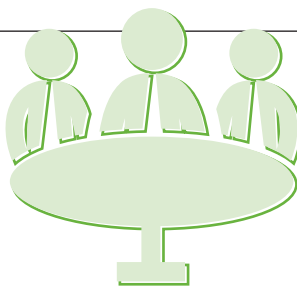


A SAGE ON A STAGE (1988-1996)

It would be no surprise that many teachers at the beginnings of careers teach following the methods by which they were taught. For me, for the most

part, that meant lectures, lectures, lectures, with occasional space made for discussion with students. I started teaching in the summer of 1988 (as a Physics TA) worked all the way through 1996, and most of my teaching, as I look back on it, was a largely uninterrupted – but not ineffective – monologue.

For many teachers starting out, falling into lecture mode – a sage on a stage – is understandable. Young teachers often struggle to establish their own authority – command of subject matter and command of the classroom. Wielding authority subtly and with restraint takes time to feel natural, so a common strategy for the inexperienced teacher is to keep everything in order – instructor, students, and method – so that control can be maintained. The students come to be seen as empty vessels (which they are not) and to fill those vessels with information is the teacher’s task (which it is not). Many traditionalists and some students find this “information distribution” model comfortable.



A SEAT AT A TABLE (1997-2004)

By 1997, after a full decade in the classroom, I had my *stuff locked down*: lectures, students, classrooms. I was efficient, knowledgeable, and always in charge. And I was bored out of my mind. When I mentioned this frustration to my father, who was on the verge of his own retirement, he plainly pointed out that most people – particularly teachers – get burned out in a job after about 10 years. So I asked what I was supposed to do. He suggested that I could change careers, or, if I still wanted to teach, I would have to reinvent myself in the classroom. From the roots, the ground up. Get radical about it.

It was a very specific phone call that I can still remember. “You can teach for 40 years,” he said, “or you can teach the same year 40 times.”

So I went back to school – graduate school, that is, and split my studies at the University of South Florida between American Literature and writing – in the latter area, how digital technology was changing our notions of literacy. The obvious change to my lessons came in the increase of e-mail, chat rooms, MOO’s and MUD’s – all new writing environments, brought about with the advent of laptop learning. But more fundamentally, I got rid of my precious lectern – and eventually, my desk – and structured my lessons to be about student-based discussions. Then I called it forum; at Palmer Trinity, we call it Harkness. I had a seat at the table and talked with my students rather than wielding authority over them. Skills and knowledge were gradually constructed by students across a variety of interactive environments in which I best served as a guide and expert.

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND (2004-2014)

I found that, having undertaken one radical revision as a teacher, it became easier for me to periodically examine how I might find fresh approaches in the classroom. Feedback from students and colleagues was often essential for



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study, in London, in a course called “Colonialism’s Impact on British National Identity,” taught by literature professor Anu Needham and history professor Steven Volk, both from Oberlin. It was a truly interdisciplinary course, the likes of which I’d taken at Amherst and which I’d been trying to build at Palmer Trinity in bridging American Literature and US History.

I returned from London with the notion that an interdisciplinary course is like a child – or, rather, it is the particular offspring of the teachers working together to assemble the course – especially in the setting of an independent school. When, in the years to follow, I was fortunate enough to work with colleagues in crossing English with Biology (Ms. Winn) or with Religious Studies (Mr. Collins) or with Physics (Mr. Rizvi) or History (Mr. Godley and Dr. Regalado), each of those units or courses bore the clear imprint of the personalities of the teachers involved – and necessarily so. These approaches helped students understand that the separation of their studies into different and discrete subjects or disciplines is largely an efficiency imposed by institutional frameworks.

More importantly, for my own development, it was exciting to grow by learning to think differently. An English teacher in a Biology or a Physics classroom is indeed a stranger in a strange land. But to move out of my own discipline (textual interpretation and linguistic composition) to understand how a scientist or historian thinks about the classroom and the world has been good for the intellect and even better for the soul.

this process. In 2004, my personal circumstances provided me with the time and freedom to travel much more than I had in the past. On a long shot, I applied for a summer teacher seminar with the National Endowment for the Humanities. I was fortunate to be accepted to



The author, age one, receiving a lesson in writing his name from Phil Hayes, his father, a lifelong educator.

classroom. I tend to rely a bit too readily on previous incarnations of myself. Discussions might digress too easily into digressions on religion or science or history rather than remain focused on the literary reading of the day; I might schedule one too many Harkness discussions in a given week; at worst, I’ll lecture for the entire period. I don’t think that I’m a horrible teacher on any of those days, but I know they are signals to me (and me alone) that it’s time to pull things up by the roots and replant.

When I think about my favorite teaching moments in the past few years, almost all of them have happened in one-on-one discussions with students – working out preliminary ideas for an essay, editing a troublesome paragraph, dissecting a particularly thorny passage of poetry, clarifying a difficult concept, or even gentle advice in the face of a young person’s delicate dilemma. Always, always, those best moments are with a particular student, in a particular moment in time, addressing a particular problem or question or issue. Those lessons are unique – handmade, I would call them. I have a handful of them from my recent days at Palmer Trinity; I reckon I need to gather some more. So I’ll start digging around in the dirt over the summer with that idea in mind.

Maybe the one-on-one approach is also a backlash against the growth of standardization, against mandated frameworks and common cores, and against the encroachment of the testing regime across almost all of American education. At Palmer Trinity, most of those pressures don’t make it past the front gate. And when I consider what makes Palmer Trinity most special across grade levels and among departments, it’s that sense of a learning community where we all make a point of knowing each student, teaching them wherever and whoever they may be, and caring about their learning as we would want for ourselves. We would all love to learn in a place that, when the moment called, the perfect lesson appeared, providing what that student, and that student alone, needed most to learn.

It would be a lesson very much like the one I learned in that phone conversation I had with my father back in 1997.



signs of when I’m becoming a little bored or complacent in the

A HANDFUL OF HANDMADE LESSONS

Eventually, my habit of reinvention has become a necessity. I have become better at recognizing the warning